

Where will mentally ill in danger go now?

By [Editorial Board](#)

Is it better to restrain mentally ill people who are a clear danger to themselves and others or leave them alone, allowing them to wander the streets?

Clearly, intervention is the better approach.

Or, at least, it was.

The Washington state Supreme Court ruled last week it's unconstitutional to warehouse mentally ill patients in hospital emergency rooms — in extreme cases, patients are strapped to gurneys and forcibly medicated — even if space is not available at certified psychiatric treatment facilities.

The justices said a lack of funds, doesn't cut it as an excuse.

Many advocates for the mentally ill are cheering the ruling. That's understandable. After all, holding someone against their will in emergency rooms, particularly when restrained, feels draconian.

And we would agree it is clearly a last-resort option.

But as Victoria Roberts, deputy director for the state Department of Social and Health Services, bluntly — but accurately — said: The unintended consequence of this ruling could result in patients who need care ending up on the streets.

Rep. Ross Hunter, D-Medina and chairman of the state House Appropriations Committee, is nevertheless talking as if the lawmakers will rally before the annual legislative session in January.

“It's always been inhumane not to provide treatment; now it's clearly illegal,” Hunter said.

Hunter advocates the state expand Western and Eastern State hospitals as well as add less-expensive beds at community treatment facilities. Hunter said care at a state psychiatric hospital can cost \$600 a day, while the care in a community clinic is about half that.

That all sounds great except these actions require money — hundreds of millions of dollars.

Washington state does not have the cash to increase funding to treat the mentally ill unless taxes are raised or funding is cut from other state programs and projects.

Given the state is already under a court order to add billions of dollars to basic education funding, it's unrealistic to believe significant funding increases for mental health will be approved by lawmakers.

So if there is absolutely nowhere to take the mentally ill that is acceptable, what can be done?

That's a question that should have been answered by those behind the legal actions before seeking to take away the hospital emergency room option.